Charlotte
Yeah, it's always so difficult to find a starting point.
Maybe I have to do it later.

Katinka
The introduction?

Frances
Yes! That's a good idea! Podcasts do that a lot, don't they?

Charlotte
I don't know!

Frances
Totally! It's a good idea!

Charlotte
Hello and welcome to this new episode of Mute/Unmute. I'm Charlotte, and I'll talk today together with Frances and Katinka about accessibility and vulnerability in art school, where we are all studying at the moment. Though, we don't know each other from art school but we got to know each other in Sickness Affinity Group, a support and resource sharing group, which is based in Berlin. The Sickness Affinity Group is the reason why we all met. But today we don't want to talk for the Sickness Affinity Group, but from our own personal perspectives that consists out of many different lived experiences.

I invited Frances and Katinka to become part of this podcast episode, because so many things I learned about sharing vulnerability and insecurity but also about access needs, I learned them outside school. From other artists and collectives, but also materials that have been shared, inside the Sickness Affinity Group. So, I thought it would be nice to invite two people for a conversation who share these different contexts. And I'd like to say before we're starting that this talk is an exchange of experiences, and a collection of ideas and a searching, rather than something which is closed or finished.
Here we go!

(Break)

Katinka
Maybe we can say our pronouns? I think that would be nice.

Frances
Yeah! And what school we're going to, maybe? If that's relevant.
And maybe where we're from? No?

Katinka
Yeah!

Charlotte
That would explain the difference in the English level! (laughing)

Frances
No, it's not about this. I feel like when people hear me talking, they will wonder where I'm from.

Katinka
Yeah, true, they will! I mean, I would, definitely. (Laughing)
I think it's quite obvious where we are from. We have a quite strong accent.

Frances
Yeah. (Laughing)

(Break)

Charlotte
Okay, so maybe we can start with a little introduction round?
Fran, you wanna start?

Frances
Hi, my name's Frances Breden, my pronoun is she. I am a student, I'm second semester at the University der Künste, here in Berlin. I'm a Scorpio, a love to garden. I'm from Vancouver, Canada, which some people call the un-ceded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam people. I've been a member of Sickness Affinity Group (SAG) since 2017. So I was there when SAG was born, more or less.

Sickness Affinity Group is a collective, it's a support group and a resource sharing group. It's been around for a few years. We have bimonthly meetings in Berlin, and its focus is on accessibility and health in the arts, in particular. Just because a lot of the members are artists or arts adjacent. We try to centre accessibility also in how we work and centre chronically ill and disabled members. But Sickness Affinity Group is mixed ability group. And it's great, I like Sickness Affinity Group a lot. And sometimes some people get together and do more productive projects but it's not like the main goal of the project.

I think it's interesting how we all met through Sickness Affinity Group but it's not really what we're here today representing. We're just different people have an affinity for talking about sickness. (Laughing)

I work as a curator and events organiser in the arts and I really like collectives. I'm also part of Coven Berlin, a queer feminist collective here.

How I'm doing today is, that I feel a bit scattered. Because Coven has an event coming up next week, that you can check online at a time you're watching, and we'll be having an event with Sickness Affinity Group soon, hopefully in early July.
And, yeah, it's, it's good. It's just funny to try to organise events that only happen online because it doesn't really feel like real but it's still a lot of work.

Charlotte
Yeah, a lot.

Frances
It's been really raining, horrible weather here. But then there was a break in the clouds and so I got to bike, the 45 minutes to come from Southern Neukölln here two beautiful Rummelsburg where my studio is, with these lovely people.

Charlotte
Yeah, thanks for having us!

Katinka
Shall I go on? Hi, my name is Katinka. I also study at UDK. I'm now in my fourth semester and I'm in a performance class. I like using different kinds of media and I'm interested in a lot of different things. I mean, I do a lot of research, which I enjoy. Sometimes I'm just getting into many different things at the same time. But I'm sometimes having a hard time to translate it or get into the next step. So anyway, I don't know what I wanted to say now.

I'm from Frankfurt originally but I live in Berlin since 2015 and before that I was also in Holland for some years. I've been in the SAG reading groups up until now. That are different from the regular meetings. But that's how I met the people. (Laughing) And I think that's it.

Charlotte
Maybe you want to add to your pronoun?

Katinka
Yeah, my pronoun is she, sorry.

Charlotte
Hi, my name is Charlotte. I also use the pronoun she and I study at HFBK. That's also why we're in this podcast right now. (Laughing)

I just arrived in the afternoon to Berlin and then went right to the studio Fran. It's very nice to be in a place, which I didn't know. Especially now during these times where I'm often taking the same ways and spending time in the same space.

I got to know the Sickness Affinity Group because of other people that I met in Berlin. And I knew about it for a pretty long time but I never really considered me, being part of these meetings. And then I somehow realized that I can do it. So I went there last October for the first time and since then I'm taking part in the meetings, but I am not part of the Orga Group.

Maybe we can just jump in with the first question of one situation where you realise in the art school context, that there's this topic of accessibility or inaccessibility or vulnerability, which may also influenced your further experiences.

Frances
I can go. (Laughing)

Which is that I started going to UDK during COVID. So all my semesters have been online. And I think it's pretty amazing to see – like a lot of my program is foreigners and newcomers in Germany – so much of how I see people receive support or not fall through the cracks in terms of like finding housing or understanding how to sign up for courses or just like anything, it's through the other students. And how little of that is through the actual university, and how that's kind of just normalised.

And I think even more so now, that it's really hard to catch someone just to ask a question. And so it's like even more inaccessible to like get at the people within the institution, that's been that's something that I think of.

Katinka
My point is actually very similar, I would say.

I think my experience was also kind of an inaccessibility to knowledge of how the structure works and like what expectations are there and how to integrate yourself. So to get an insight of what things you are supposed to do. I started and I think we had one semester or a bit more that was physical and then like the university closed. So, then there was again a different situation but even in the first semester, even when school was open I feel like a lot of stuff goes on through contacts with other people. Especially through contacts with students from higher semesters or from different classes that can share experiences and tell you how things are going. But if you don't know people... I wouldn't say, I'm so much in contact with people. I think it's changing now and it got more but in the beginning I realised that basically you need to know people, if you want to be able to meet the requirements and know which classes to sign up for and all this kind of stuff. Yeah, this is where I feel there's something inaccessible.

Charlotte
Yeah, I think this really relates to a thought that I also shared with you in the meeting before. I also had the feeling, that it is some somehow a quality that things are not spoken about. And that I need to find out about them. And if I'm good enough or if I'm intelligent enough, or it is kind of my responsibility to really find out about these structures and hierarchies that are shaping the school.

And that for me this exclusiveness – exclusivity? – of events but also actually of art works (if they're really complicated, and I wouldn't understand them) then seemed like a quality to me – I don't understand them, but if I'd be good enough, then I would. So, I think for me there's a connection in this narrative of of the arts. And that's maybe changing slowly, but I think that the first time I really understood about it was being in a meeting of the Sickness Affinity Group or in a workshop of the Feminist Healthcare Research Group, where the feeling really was – you are

welcome and you can ask and we try to explain you as good as possible so that you can follow as easily as possible.
And this really changed the way I thought that I can work too. Because before I had the feeling that I have to do a cryptic translation of what I want to say to make it somehow a quality – to make the quality higher? (Unsure about the right English word)

Katinka
Yeah, I think that's also something to question – this whole way of how art is communicated and put into words and made exclusive. I mean it's kind of weird: Being in an art school and personally thinking about this and feeling that is something that I want to question and that I'm questioning. But at the same time being part of the structure that you... It's interesting, I think. But I think this feeling that you meant was about immediately start to question yourself rather than the structure.

Charlotte
Yeah. And for example, when you just talked about this invisible structures, and people supporting each other, then I think this is something one can really do differently in announcing structures more clearly, or also in small meetings. When I think of the Sickness Affinity Group for example, getting an email with the timetable of the meeting so that people really know what will happen and also know who has which role.

Frances
I mean, it's not like I think that the art world that I inhabit in Berlin is perfect or something but I feel like at events there's kind of these norms of everyone being asked to say their pronoun or everyone before an event gathering access needs or always having transcription or having like whisper translation, or interpreting available for different languages or maybe even asking if people need childcare or something like that. And trying to keep formats like..., like you would never in my experience is like planning events and stuff I would never plan, a four hour lecture where that's like all it is, you know? And that's what we're supposed to do in our professional practice or something, but it's not what we do in our like universities space. It's kind of funny.

Charlotte
We talked about it before, in the last meeting: That the consciousness about needs and needs that need to be met or that can be met, so that the meetings or the structures are more comfortable for everybody, is really something which is not considered when establishing structures.
When talking about access needs, just to explain what that could be: Gathering access needs before the meeting, so that the person who's leading the meeting is aware that a person needs several breaks or can't turn on the camera, or it could be a transcription of sound or several things. People have different needs. And they can be considered in the way that meetings going.

Katinka
Yeah, I guess it just means more work. It's hard to organise a group, I think. To find someone that's actually like taking responsibility, especially if it's like people that, for example, struggling with mental health issues that are actually the people that potentially would need to different access. For them to take over the role of like organising, communicating, like, all this kind of stuff is mostly too much. So there I think is actually the difficulty. How to? It has to be one person that feels like that they can do that. Yeah, a person that communicates in between...

Charlotte
But that could be also a tutor or someone who is aware of this topic. And the institution being aware that such a tutor must be paid.

Katinka
Yeah.

Frances
Yeah and we talked a little bit before – I think, it can be framed or it can feel like taking care of other people's access needs is a lot of work and that it's extra work and it's actually stretching you thinner. But I guess the idea is a fairly abled person who's interested in accessibility thinks

that it's really important. You know, it's not just something you do for other people. So like we've talked about before, so many people at our institutions that work there, like the professors and the administrators and stuff. Imagine if they could say their access needs! Like that's part of it, I think. If you are being worked to the edge and not listening to your own self, well, why would I listen to your access needs. Like, I'm pushing myself and you can too!

Yeah, so maybe it's also your liberation is bound up in other people's liberation.

Charlotte
Yeah, I think you put it pretty nicely the last time. You said: An inaccessible system is hurting everybody who's part of the system and I think, it's pretty true.

Frances:
Yeah, it also could be a really cool opportunity to rethink formats. I had one professor Luiza Prado who was really good. She's an artist and a designer, and she then also did a guest lecture. And she really did a lot of work to design the classes. I think she may have even done it before COVID I'm not sure but she...

Charlotte:
Is it called Anti-colonial Joy?

Frances:
Yes! Did you attend it?

Charlotte:
No, I just watched it afterwards, after uploading. I think it's still accessible.

Frances:
Yeah, it's so cool. She makes these YouTube videos. So the first hour of her lecture is a recorded video. It's so much more relaxing to watch a video on YouTube than to like watch a professor lecture live because you ca pause it, you can walk away. I can even listen to it on the bike or so.

Then we would do these readings and then these little discussions. And then part of her readings were also podcasts, or she had a musical playlist with anti-colonial music and all of this stuff. She would send short YouTube videos and it was just really using this online space to make an experience, that's a lot less exhausting. I mean, I'm sure that this class could have also – with access stuff there's always more, you know. But it was just an example of a format for a class that was not like exhausting and probably also less exhausting for her, I guess.

Charlotte 23:13
For example, having constant feedback rounds, I think is also something which would help a lot to somehow improve formats, online or offline. But to just integrate it into a routine. To rethink: What did actually help you? And then to just regularly get and give feedback on that, helps a lot, I think. Like in the meetings of the Sickness Affinity Group, where we have short feedback on the accessibility of the meeting. Like what could we change the next time? I think makes a lot of sense.

Frances
Yeah, if you have space to incorporate it.

Katinka
I mean, I remember we had some like questionnaires, going around, I think in the second semester. They were asking different questions about the classes that we attended.
But yeah, it was an evaluation for the university side, obviously. But it wasn't like a personal feedback so much. We weren't in contact with the people that we actually evaluated. It wasn't so much about working on the structure that you already in. It was like the class has finished and then we got this thing, you know what I mean? Like a hindsight evaluation of how things went. So not really being in contact and exchanging about feelings and stuff, within a structure that regularly works and meets.

Charlotte
Yeah. And also, as you just said, not only having a very quick feedback round at the end but really once taking time at the end of the semester to be in conversation about it. And I think, there's also a difference between giving the person feedback on the person or on the formats or on the methods being used. And that could also really help.

Frances:
That's a very good point. Yeah, that's the part that really feels like set in stone.

(Break)

Optimistic points? (Laughing)

Charlotte
Yeah that's good! Wishes!

Katinka
I think one thing that I also wish would be different was that there was more like sharing resources in general. That could also be initiated institutionally, like by the school. Because I feel there's a lot to share and you can support each other, way more than we do. But maybe the ways are not, like the formats are not there, but they can be created and they can make it way easier. To stay in touch with each other but also to share knowledge to share whatever it is. So yeah, I think that would be nice if that would improve somehow. But this is also something, I would never know who should I address this to. Who would I have to talk to bring this even up as an idea in a big art school.

I guess you can only start small, maybe within your class and see if you can connect with other classes.

Charlotte
But I think that's also great. To start as students to support each other, even though it takes a lot of energy. But I think, it can also bring so much energy and so much lightness.

Katinka
If there isn't a room and you have to create the room, I guess. And organise and talk to other students.

Charlotte
I don't know how it was for you, but for me in the beginning I really had this impression that I'm weak, if I'm asking for support. I didn't have this understanding of who we are now all in the structure we will support each other, because that's totally reasonable, but rather like everybody seems to get along and I'm struggling. So I should better not talk about it. I think this was my impression and then to really get to the point to say: 'How do we organise ourselves? How can we create this support system?' was rather something which I didn't see as something so positive in the beginning.

Frances
You didn't want to be so close, or something?

Charlotte
No, I felt like everybody's doing their own stuff and everybody got along. Maybe there were some circles of friends but it was not this very open sharing of things.

Katinka
I think I don't really share this experience so much that's why I can't really say...

Charlotte
No, but that's interesting too!

Katinka

Yeah, I don't know for me... most of the people that I was in closer contact to when I started and also now, which are just a few, but we were always talking about the issues that are there. I never felt like I shouldn't talk about my struggles. I was rather frustrated that there's not a direct communicator from what is happening, how students are feeling to the structure, kind of.

Frances
Yeah, I feel always feel very grateful for whenever anybody on these online channels opens up or shares anything personal or direct messages somebody. It always feels very brave. Those people who are able to do that kind of thing first.
Yeah, I can't imagine what it would be like in real school!

Katinka
Yeah, it's hard!

Frances
In person?

Katinka
I mean it's hard for you to imagine since you started online, that's what I meant.

Charlotte
You were saying before that you actually support each other a lot in this structural way. So I was wondering if there is some structure for this or if it's really informal, or if you could describe it.

Frances
I mean it's really like WhatsApp right now. I guess the thing about WhatsApp groups is that it's very like low energy and rapid. But yeah, I'm not saying that it's the best format to support people, but that's what we've got.

Charlotte
So people write: I'm looking for a room, do you know anything? They would share this, for example?

Frances
Yeah, and the vaccines and everything about school. Especially because so many of us, people in this program moved to Berlin like two weeks before it started. Maybe that's also ...

Katinka
Bonding.

Frances
Yes, exactly. (Laughing)

Charlotte
But it's I think it's really nice to have a very low level way of exchanging and seeing the fact that there are other students too, who might profit from your knowledge. As you just said in the beginning. Sharing the knowledge that we have and that you can also profit from their knowledge. It's a both way...How do you say?

Frances 31:39
...exchange? Two way street?

Charlotte 31:47
Two way street?! Maybe! (Laughing)

Katinka
(Speaks German) Ich musste irgendwie an zweischneidiges – wie sagt man das nochmal? – denken.

Charlotte

(Speaks German) Schwert!

Katinka
(Speaks German) Aber das ist etwas ganz anderes, oder?

Frances
This sounds like something negative!

Katinka
Yeah, it is kind of. It's more connected to something negative, right?

Charlotte
It's about ambivalence, no?

Katinka
Ah, really?

Frances
A double edged sword.

Katinka
Exactly, a double edged sword!

Frances
Yeah well, it's also a double edged sword.

Katinka
To be honest, I was thinking about it. I find it like very exhausting many times, there's now so many channels of communication digitally. I think it's good because you can support each other and stuff, but it's also really really exhausting. On top of having almost all your lectures on screen, and you have Slack, WhatsApp, Telegram. So many different like tools of communication. Some private, some connected to school, some to work. And it's all merging and you're never basically free off the phone and you always have to be available. That's very stressful.

Frances 32:59
Totally!

Katinka
But that's also another topic.

Charlotte
So offline support meetings, after COVID-19!

Katinka
Yeah, offline support meetings.

Frances
Offline support meetings, that's a good idea.

Charlotte
Yeah, on the other hand – and this is what we talked about when you weren't there – how to still be aware that not everybody has now the same opportunity to come to such a meeting and for some people it's definitely still more dangerous or difficult or they have to take care of a lot of things, when meeting with people. And maybe now, when regulations are changing again, how to keep this awareness that there are still big differences in how people experience this situation.

Frances
And there's also so many people for whom meeting online is way more accessible. To not have to leave bed or to not leave the house with the kids or whatever or if they have to move a lot or migrate or travel or whatever. I also feel like, you know, there's so many reasons that like online

school has like been an accessible format for a long time. I hope that we don't just lose that, totally.

Katinka
Yeah, I guess like to at least give the possibility of it. And to be in conversation about what's best for each individual person and try to make it work. I think that would be a good approach and there's like some things to pick out of there that can be actually useful while talking about accessibility and should be picked out and be implemented.

Charlotte
Yeah, I think this was also something so many people were frustrated about who advocated for accessibility and for online opportunities for so long. And it was always not possible and then suddenly it was possible.

Thanks a lot for sharing! And for hosting ... and for coming!

Frances
Thank you!

Katinka 35:32
We still wanted to see the sunset, right?

Frances
Yeah! Should we run?

Katinka
Yes, I think it would be nice!

Frances
I think we... Oh, it's in two minutes!

Charlotte
No!

Katinka
That might be a bit too fast!

Transcribed by https://otter.ai